

Brownies and paper airplanes by **OrangeLovePerson**

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Summary: It's been more than three weeks since the gate was closed, and today, Max has had enough. It's time to gain a new friend! (Max & El friendship, Mike & El fluffiness)

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"What are you reading, El?", Dustin asked, his eyebrows rising on his forehead.

They were sitting on the stairs in front of Will's house, waiting for the others to arrive. Mike was unusually late, - he'd said his Mum made him vacuum the living room again because of some "bad word" he'd accidentally used in front of Holly, and Lucas would probably pick up Max from the amusement hall before joining them with her. And Will was still asleep, Mrs. Byers had said... He'd probably gotten tired over the past hour, after they'd discussed their plans, using the walkie talkies. Dustin and El didn't mind waiting a little longer before greeting him.

El closed the book in her lap, memorising the page number beforehand (one-two-eight), and held it up for Dustin to see. "*The Shining*?", he read, looking surprised at the cover. "Hm, isn't that quite scary?", he wondered, looking curious.

She shrugged. "It's more for grown-ups, I think... It's from Hopper. He doesn't have many books."

"So he really lets you read that sort of stuff?"

"Yes."

Dustin laughed, obviously excited. "You know, they made it into a horror movie, a few years ago! Will and I really wanted to go see it, but we were, like, 9 or 10 at the time..."

El frowned. "It must be a really long movie.", she stated, looking at the vast amount of pages in front of her.

"Maybe we all can grab it from the video rental store, some time!", Dustin suggested, his teeth blazing happily. El still wasn't quite used to the sight, and especially not to the weird sound Dustin sometimes made when people talked about his teeth. Something that sounded

like a word with a lot of "R"s.

"Okay.", she said, actually feeling a little relieved at the idea. There were a few things in *"The Shining"* that she didn't quite get yet, and it would be really interesting to see them on a TV screen explained. Except, of course, if the movie was different from the book. Hopper had told El already that this could happen. "Sometimes, film makers change the whole plot and everything.", he'd said.

"Dustin?"

"Hmm?" He had fumbled a yo-yo from one of his pockets, and standing up, he leaned against one of the jambs next to them and let it glide up and down on the string, eyeing it with a look of concentration and almost sticking out his tongue, for some reason.

"What is a "bitch"?", El asked him, and immediately her head jerked around at the sudden sound of his toy falling loudly to the floor.

"What?!", he asked, looking both appalled and amused at the question.

"What is a bitch?", she repeated, curious.

"Why do you want to know that, El?", Dustin laughed, a bit embarrassed. She shrugged.

"The man in the book says it sometimes. I've heard it before, but I don't really understand..."

"Oh, you know... It's just this really insulting word for women. Like, really insulting. You better shouldn't use it, okay El?"

"Okay.", she agreed, still looking thoughtful. "What about "bitching"?", she then asked him, eyebrows furrowed.

"Huh?"

"Hey guys!", they heard Mike's excited voice from about fifteen metres away, and they both looked up. He was riding his bike really fast, face flushed red from the cool autumn wind, and a bright smile spreading all the way across his features.

"Hi Mike.", El and Dustin greeted him in unison, watching as he climbed off of his bike and carelessly dropped it to the floor. He stopped a few steps in front of them, looking like he wanted to give El a hug but couldn't decide whether to actually go through with it or not, and eventually he just settled for dropping down on the stairs next to her, sitting quite close. "Hi.", he repeated, a little lamely, but El could feel the skin on her neck tingle slightly from his soft voice. "Hi.", she said back, happily.

"Jeez, you guys...", Dustin mumbled, under his breath, and picked his yo-yo up from the floor. "Be glad Lucas isn't here right now..."

Mike flashed him an annoyed glance. "So, er, what have you guys been talking about?", he then asked, focusing mainly on El again, who just shrugged.

"Books, mostly.", Dustin said, vaguely, while watching his yo-yo flip upwards and downwards. He eyed the book in her lap again, contemplating. "But, seriously El, you should probably read something a little less violent for now. Hasn't there been enough scary stuff lately?" His eyes started blazing as a thought occurred to him. "Oh! Hey, you know what you should read? *"The Lord of the Rings"*! That's something for everyone!"

Mike was quick to agree on that, and the next twenty minutes were spent with trying to explain the entire back story of the books to El, followed by a few more minutes about J.R.R Tolkien's personal life and all sorts of movie references, and soon enough the door behind them opened, revealing a very sleepy looking Will Byers.

"Hey, Will!", Dustin greeted him, patting him on the shoulder as the boy sat down next to him. "Got enough sleep?"

Will nodded, rubbing his eyes. "Hmm. For now.", he rasped, before chuckling at his own drowsy voice.

El could relate to that constant feeling of tiredness Will was experiencing at the moment. She'd also felt very weak for the past month, but now it was almost time to look for a Christmas tree, Hopper had said, and El was slowly regaining her strength. The excitement for the upcoming celebration had something to do with it,

but she also felt genuinely better.

"Where are Lucas and Max?", Will queried, and Mike shrugged. "No idea. It's not that far from the amusement centre to here..."

"Do you think they are alright?", Will mumbled, zipping up his jacket against the cold wind.

"Nah. They're probably just sucking faces somewhere.", Dustin snorted, and Mike frowned. "That's always your first assumption.", he grumbled, for some reason furiously blushing, right then, and not quite meeting El's eyes. El, who wasn't really sure what the conversation was about, at this point, watched Dustin's frequently jumping yo-yo. She gave it a tiny extra push with her powers, now and then, happy to see Dustin's wide grin.

She'd never have said it, - wouldn't even have known how to properly say it,- but she was secretly glad that she hadn't spend a lot of time with Max, so far, and that Max hadn't arrived today yet, either.

El wasn't entirely sure what to think of Max, and she wasn't entirely sure what to do about that. She just knew that she had been terrified after seeing her in the gym with Mike, a few days before she'd closed the gate and all that.

He'd looked happy. He'd talked so much to El, all these nights, and yet in that instant he hadn't seemed to be nearly as lost without her, as the other way around. He had looked as if he was having so much fun... With some other girl. Some girl with really long, pretty hair, and one that wouldn't get into all sorts of trouble for just being there, in school... seeing Mike.

It had seemed so unfair to El, at the time. And even now, she felt a little awkward. She tried to ignore that fact as hard as she could, hoping desperately that Max would just stop being around, at one point. But instead Max was *always* around, somehow, and she was always, always pretty. Max was funny, too, and smart... She didn't need people to explain things to her, all the time. She was just a normal girl, one that could put all her thoughts into words in the matter of seconds, and who even knew how to drive a car. El, on the other hand, hadn't even known that kids were allowed to do that!

"Hey, you okay?", Mike suddenly asked her, looking at her quite intently from the side. "You look so sad, El..."

Her light brown eyes flickered up to his darker ones, and the worry she found there made her heart melt, for a second. She nodded. "I'm fine.", she quietly replied, and then felt bad about it. Friends don't lie.

But that's what she'd done for more than three weeks, now, wasn't it?

She'd pretended that she didn't worry about this thing, - had pretended that there wasn't a thing to worry about to begin with, when really, she'd felt it tug at her mind several times a day. A constant fear was crawling around in her, not as bad as all those other fears that had been there all along, and not nearly as bad as to overshadow her happiness at having Mike and Dustin and Lucas back, properly meeting Will, and not to be fighting with Hopper any longer.

But still... El knew that her awful feelings around Max wouldn't just suddenly disappear over night. She needed to do something. She just didn't know what that thing was, yet.

"You sure?", Mike asked, and El paused for a second, managing a genuine smile at his worried expression. Mike was such a good person. "Yes.", she answered, and only barely resisted the urge to grasp for his hand and intertwine their fingers.

"Oh. Okay.", he mumbled, looking sort of happy and yet not quite convinced, and maybe he was moving slightly closer to her, on the stairs, but maybe she was only imagining that.

"Perhaps we should just get started, guys.", Dustin suggested with a shrug. "It looks like rain and if it's getting any darker, we might as well forget about the whole thing."

Their plan for today had been a paper plane flying competition: Mrs Byers had found some old ones she'd once made herself somewhere, and the boys had had several long and heated discussions about proper aviation architecture, afterwards... Which were now supposed to become useful in one way or another. The boys had basically made an entire rule book for today, with different levels of

difficulty and all that, and in the end they wanted to find out whose theories on paper planes were right.

El didn't really know anything about paper planes, but she was pretty curious about the whole thing and had assured them not to help anyone cheat with her powers. Mike had grinned at her when they'd agreed on this, and some tiny voice in the back of her head had told her that Mike wouldn't need any help, anyway. He was really clever.

As they made their way inside, Mrs Byers came over to El and, as always, embraced her quickly, - a tradition that had been introduced right after El's returning. El loved it – Will's mum was always so nice to her.

Will and Dustin had decided to draw a quick draft of their respective paper planes, first, before building them, but Mike was quick to assure El that he knew exactly what to do.

"Dustin thinks it's all about some fancy side flaps, or something.", he told her, quietly, "But even the best side flaps can't help you when the whole thing is immediately aiming at the floor! That's why I'm always trying to put some more weight on the back of the plane, instead of the front. *That's* the most important thing. You know?"

El nodded, feeling infected by his enthusiasm.

"Do you kids want some tea and cookies?", Mrs Byers asked, sticking her head into her youngest son's bedroom.

"No thanks, Mrs. Byers!", Mike replied, friendly, before looking over at El with questioning eyes. She shook her head, smiling. "No thanks."

She'd had several eggos for breakfast and lunch, already. Hopper might be on a diet, but luckily that didn't really affect her.

"What about you, Will? Are you thirsty? Hungry?", his Mum wanted to know, looking a little worried and very eager to help her youngest son in any way she could. Joyce Byers was still quite the bundle of nerves when it came to him, no matter how lovely she dealt with that fact. Will, who was currently also sitting on the floor next to his bed, but on the other side of it than El and Mike, barely looked up from

his drawings to answer her. "No, I'm all right, thanks Mum."

She stood on her tiptoes, curiously trying to catch a glimpse of his project over the edge of his bed, but gave up when she noticed that the details weren't easy to make out from over there, anyway. She chuckled.

"Well, I'm certainly looking forward to seeing all your little paper planes fly, kids. Make sure the pilots are wearing seatbelts!", she joked, before leaving again.

"Ahh! Crap!", they heard Dustin exclaim, from somewhere in the living room. He'd insisted on building his plane in another part of the house than the others, claiming that his brilliant ideas were just too enticing for his enemies.

"What?", Mike asked, loudly. "Did you just realise your lousy flap plan won't work?"

Dustin's laughter came back as an answer. "Yeah, keep dreaming! I cut myself with the paper. Don't worry, humanity won't have to wait much longer for this innovational masterpiece!"

"Should we get him a band-aid?", El asked the others. Hopper always said that you should put a band-aid on any nasty, fresh cuts, because some diseases had an easier job making you sick if you never used band-aids. Then again, he'd also said that a lot of those diseases weren't around any longer, today... He'd said that Doctors were getting better and better at finding things out.

"Nah, he'll be alright.", Mike assured her, eyeing her fondly for a second, before clearing his throat and somewhat sheepishly focusing on his plane again.

It was amazing how he could make an actual plane out of a regular piece of paper, really. El hadn't quite understood before what they'd meant, talking about those things, but it didn't even look that difficult to build them!

"Do you want to try it?", Mike suggested a few minutes later, smiling brightly. She nodded, excitedly, and Mike put a new piece of scratch

paper in front of her.

"Okay, so first of all you fold that corner...-", he pointed at one of the corners closest to her, "...over here."

She did what he told her.

"And now, the same thing on the other side."

Again, El followed his instructions.

"Yes, like that. The tidier you do it, the better it usually works. And now you fold this edge here towards the middle, see?"

They kept going on like that, his warm, unhurried voice calming her down almost subconsciously while he told her what to do with the paper. His own plane lay almost forgotten somewhere to their left, and while Will and Dustin were probably catching up rapidly, Mike didn't seem to mind doing this with her at all.

That's just who he was. Always taking time for her, always trying to do something fun with her, even if it meant missing out on other stuff...

It was really hard not to stare at him, sometimes. She knew that he'd probably find it weird if she did that as much as she secretly wanted to, but, on the other hand, the urge to keep staring at him was sometimes even stronger than the urge to not seem weird in front of him. Because all her friends found her sort of weird, anyway, right? In a good way?

Dustin's excited shouting came to mind, that one sentence from over a year ago now... "She's our friend and she is *crazy*!"

El hadn't really understood that, back then, but now she could see that being exactly normal was not always the best thing that could happen to you. Sometimes, being a little weird in other people's perception had its own perks. Kali had taught her that, but, weirdly enough, also those two mouthbreathers that had wanted to hurt Mike and Dustin, last year.

If her friends were the sort of people who got hurt for being weird,

then that meant she fit right in, didn't it?

*She's our friend and she is **crazy!***

"Why are you giggling?", Mike wanted to know, chuckling himself as his eyes roamed her face. That somehow only made El laugh harder, and Mike joined in, for some reason of his own. And the more she laughed, the more Mike laughed, and so on...

"Alright guys! I'm done!", Dustin proclaimed, standing in the doorway of Will's room and eyeing them confusedly. "You two all right there?"

Mike and El's mirth eventually died down, and Mike nonchalantly grinned up at him.

"Apparently, something really funny happened.", Will explained, shrugging and standing up. Just like Dustin, he was proudly holding up his plane.

"Mike, you ready?"

"Yes, should be alright.", he nodded, holding up his less impressive, much more classical looking paper plane.

Right then, they suddenly heard the front door open, and Mrs. Byers was greeting Lucas and Max.

"Siriously guys?", Dustin asked them, stepping out of Will's room, followed by the others. Lucas and Max stood in the Byers' living room, looking anything but hurried or apologetic for being so late.

"What took you so long?"

"Man, relax.", Lucas said, pulling off his jacket and scarf. Outside the (newly repaired) window, the sky was already taking on a darkish blue. "We were just playing Dig Dug, and we sort of forgot about the time..."

Dustin rolled his eyes. "Okay, well, we're already all done with our planes, and it's getting dark already, so..."

"We've actually got a solution for that.", Max put in, grinning quite

proudly. Whatever those two had been doing, - if they actually played Did Dug or not,- it obviously had left them both in quite the good mood.

Max pulled out a few tiny paper cards with bright, slightly star-shaped stickers on them. "Those are glowing in the dark! So, what do you say, you guys: Do you want to transform your lame little plane-thingies into actual space ships, or what?"

"We also brought flashlights!", Lucas added, looking pleased with himself.

Mike seemed, like he found this offer not really tempting, probably because Max had been so obvious about how childish she found their whole plan for today in the first place. But Will seemed like he was up to it, and Dustin shook his head, but also gave in, reaching for the stickers. "Okay, okay, give them here. But I swear, if this additional weight ends up causing my defeat, then..-"

"Then we'll never dare being late to something like this again, great big plane builder!", Max vowed sarcastically, and sat down on the couch, her skateboard in her lap. While Lucas eagerly grabbed some paper, pens and scissors, she didn't look at all in a hurry to build a paper plane.

"Er, Max, are you not joining in with the game?", Will asked, confused.

"Yeah, I don't think I will. Sounds a bit boring, to be honest. And I don't really know anything about paper planes, it would probably look pretty standard if I made one."

"Hey, you know who also doesn't really know anything about paper planes?", Dustin beamed, sitting down on the couch, too, "El!".

Max didn't look up to meet El's eyes, which was quite usual. Also as usual, she didn't make it look conspicuous in any way. "So?"

"How about you two have a competition, and we guys have a competition, and then we have another competition between the winners? You know, like in wrestling!"

"What do you know about wrestling?", Will asked Dustin, amused.

"Nothing, believe me.", Lucas deadpanned, not even looking up from his quickly moving fingers. He seemed to be really good at folding these things; he was both quick and very accurate about it.

"So, what do you say, El? Do you want to try it?"

"Try what?", Mike asked, who was just reappearing from the bathroom and sitting down on El's chair's armrest, not quite touching her in the process.

"She and Max can build some planes on their own, and then have a little competition after we have ours!", Dustin suggested, and something about the glint in his eyes made El suddenly wonder what her friend was really on about, here...

"Isn't it kind of stupid if the two people who know the least about building paper planes in this group compete about who gets to battle the winner from *our* competition?", Lucas threw in, sceptically.

Max, whose lips had twitched when he'd described this whole thing as a "battle", was now looking even more amused. "Hang on, so you guys really think we wouldn't stand a chance against you?"

Dustin scratched his neck, confused. "Well, I mean, you just said yourself that..."

"I said that I'm not some super-experienced Origami-Master, but that doesn't mean that I can't throw some paper plane really far, thank you very much. It all comes down to athletic stuff, anyway!", with that, she got up, looking determined. She grabbed a bunch of scratch paper from the couch table, and for the first time in probably a week or so, she looked directly at El.

"Come on, Eleven, let the boys have their little *battle* outside, but we are going to fold some even better paper planes now, yeah?"

"Don't you two want to watch our competition, first? There's still plenty of time after that!", Mike suggested, sounding a little frustrated at this turn of events.

"Oh, please, I think you boys will survive without an audience for now.", Max laughed, rolling her eyes. She handed El a few pieces of paper, already reaching for the sticky tape on the table.

"There's some more stuff you could use in my room. If you need other paper, or something.", Will suggested, helpful as always. "And also some layouts I made, you know, from Star wars ships and so on, you can use those!"

"Yeah, but don't you girls dare try to copy my classic Millennium Falcon", Dustin grinned, eyeing the odd plane in his hands proudly. "Believe me, it doesn't get much more authentic than this."

"Why would we want to build a paper plane that looks more like some fictional star ship than an actual paper plane?", Max wondered, not looking really convinced of the genius level of his plan.

"Because the people who design these ships actually think about physics and strategic arguments, you know?", Dustin explained. "It's not just all science fantasy, this is actually what a space ship will look like in the future!"

"Yeah, but there's a bit of a difference between a space ship and a plane...", Max argued.

"Space ships need to be pretty multifunctional, it's not like they're just working in outer space!"

"Well, not even the Millennium Falcon would have a chance against this baby.", Lucas quipped in, before Max could answer. He proudly held his plane up, looking around their party as if he was expecting someone to clap.

"Alright guys, time to shine.", Max smiled, making her way over to Will's bedroom, where the rest of their supplies were waiting.

El didn't really know what was happening any more, but when the boys shrugged and took their creations outside,- Mike a little reluctantly, - she followed the red-head, trying to remember the exact steps of building the paper plane that Mike had previously shown her.

She could just use the one he'd already helped her with, of course, but she sort of wanted to be able to build one entirely of her own. Not, that she'd have a chance against Max, anyway. If she wasn't allowed to use her powers, and if Max truly knew so much about planes, and space ships, and throwing stuff in an athletic way, then El really didn't stand a chance in this "battle".

Her bigger problem right now, however, was the time she'd now spend alone with Max. El wasn't entirely certain how it had even come to this, and it definitely felt weird and made her a little nervous. And a little angry.

Being around Max *always* made El a little angry, actually. It was just part of the whole Mike-thing. Missing him for almost a year, feeling so lost and raw and broken, and then seeing him for the first time after so long – smiling at another girl. An annoying girl.

Maybe, Max thought she could take Mike away from El. It felt like that was why she hung out with the boys so much. And even if it wasn't, El couldn't shake this horrible feeling in her gut that reminded her of such a possibility. Max made her feel so much bad stuff in her chest. Like a knot of fear and sadness and freight-car-pulling, dimension-closing anger.

"They can be so into themselves sometimes, can't they?", Max snorted, under her breath, as she flopped down on Will's bed, looking around the small room. "I mean, come on, if I'm awesome at Darts, I'm probably awesome at this too, now that I think about it..."

"Lucas has a slingshot.", El remembered, at this. She sat on the floor close to Will's door, trying to create some distance between herself and the other girl, while still remaining eye contact, for once.

"So?", Max asked, not seeing her point.

"That's also a bit like throwing paper planes.", El concluded out loud, feeling a little silly, now that she'd said it. She looked down on the scratch paper and focused on repeating the same movements as before, when Mike had been there.

It was quiet for a few moments, except for the small sounds of Mrs

Byers cooking in the kitchen, and of the boys talking and messing around outside.

"Hey, El?", Max said, at one point, clearing her throat. "Can I ask you something?"

El looked up, her eyes a little wide and her mouth a firm line. She didn't want to talk, actually. But she nodded, anyway.

"You don't like me.", Max stated.

El didn't dare moving, but her silence must have confirmed Max' theory. She sighed, eyeing the other girl intently.

"Why don't you like me?", she followed, matter-of-factly. Her eyes were all bright blue and silvery, and they jumped from one point in El's face to another without even blinking.

El still felt rather motionless. Sometimes, when things surprised her and she felt a little overwhelmed by them, talking was even harder than usually. Like when someone accused her of something bad. This conversation with Max right now weirdly reminded her of all those nasty comments Lucas had made last year, before he and El had become friends. El felt a little breathless and numb and entirely unprepared to react rightly.

"Is it because you don't trust me yet?", Max demanded to know, and El could sense that Max was getting impatient with her.

"No.", she mumbled, because that was true. If it came down to it, El did trust Max,- sort of.

Max had helped, during the fight with the demodogs. Not just in the beginning, but also later, in the tunnels. That must have been scary, and she didn't really have to do it. She'd helped El and Hopper get to the gate. She'd also helped Mike, Lucas, Dustin and that older boy with the funny hair, to escape and to get back home safely.

But then again, El wasn't sure what to think of all that. Why had Max done it? Helped El? She didn't really *know* El, that night. And El hadn't even been nice to her.

Had she done it to help Hopper?

El frowned at her own thoughts. No, that didn't make sense, either. Hopper was so grumpy sometimes, growing fond of him took a while. And Max had barely known the chief for more than a few hours, either.

Max must have done it to make the others like her? To make *Mike* like her?

El actually didn't trust Max at all, come to think of it.

"Yes.", she corrected herself, confused. "Maybe..."

"You mean, maybe you don't trust me?", Max asked, frowning, and looking equally as confused as El. The curly-haired girl nodded.

Max sighed, exasperatedly. "Okay, look. I want to get over this. It's weird that I have to do this whole stupid thing again already, in the matter of, like, a month or something."

"Huh?", El frowned, not following.

"I don't know what I did to you, El. What did I do, what is your problem with me?"

Something in Max' voice sounded very bare, all of the sudden. Like she wasn't just annoyed, or even angry, but honestly, truly hurt by El's behaviour.

El felt hurt, too. But she knew that she had to talk about it. It wasn't right to just ignore Max, when Max so obviously suffered from just that...

"They didn't like me.", she muttered, voice low and slightly raspy.

It was Max' turn to be confused. "What do you mean, who...?-"

"The others. When I first met them, they didn't like me."

Now Max looked, like *she* struggled to follow. "Okay... But they love you, El. Now they definitely care about you, so what does this have

to ...-"

"- It's been very long, before.", El kept on. "Didn't want them to forget me."

Max felt awkward. She'd started this entire conversation half-expecting El to completely overhear her, and to keep ignoring her presence like she usually did. Lucas had told her right away that El had never been someone of many words, and yet the way she'd seemed to deliberately avoid eye-contact with Max and not shown any interest in her as a person for the past couple weeks had left Max feeling like El certainly had some sort of issue with her. She didn't know what it was, she really didn't.

In hindsight, it totally made sense that *Mike* had been giving her such a hard time at first. He'd been a pain in the ass towards a lot of people, Lucas had explained. For almost an entire year, Mike had basically turned into an entirely different guy. A guy who snarled at people, smiled rarely and laughed even less frequently. A guy who frowned a lot and complained a lot and who actually, on first glance, didn't seem to deserve such friendly, funny, accepting best friends as Will, Lucas and Dustin.

It had all been because of El!

It had been because he was grieving like mad, missing her, feeling like his friends tried to replace her in some way. Maybe, it had bummed him that Lucas and Dustin had been so interested in herself, she thought, while Mike was still trying to get in contact with Eleven, day after day. He'd probably felt like being stuck in a fight against the entire world, or something. Max could relate to that feeling. Sometimes, when life was crazy and no one cared about what you cared about, she'd feel terribly angry and grumpy, too. Abusive family stuff could certainly eat away at your heart and mind, sometimes.

Now that Mike's depression seemed cured, however, he'd turned into an entirely different person, actually. He hadn't formally apologised to Max yet, but any nasty remarks or prohibitions on his part had stopped.

He didn't say *anything* against her joining them *all the time*, at the moment. There had even been a few friendly nods in her direction, and things like that. He really seemed to get along with her, now that El was back. Max felt much more capable of being herself, and less like she had to walk on eggshells around him. Perhaps he was glad that she'd so eagerly gone along with the whole tunnel plan, that night? Was he grateful that Max had shown interest in keeping El safe? Whatever it was, Max liked the way things were, right now.

Except ...- well, except for the fact that being friends with El would be pretty cool, too. Having a superhero as a friend must be nice. Especially, since the superhero seemed to be such a brave, sweet, involuntarily funny person... Towards other people than her.

So, now El was worried about her friends forgetting her, just because she'd been gone for a while? What?!

"They wouldn't have! El, are you crazy?"

El shrugged, looking not really offended, but rather embarrassed.

Max shook her head. "Eleven, can you look at me?"

El lifted her eyes just slightly, blinking up at Max a little defensively. The boys' laughter outside kept going, and Max inwardly gratulated herself for getting into such a situation with El. To get some time alone with her and have an actual conversation.

"El, they talked about you a lot. Lucas told me that he felt really bad about not being nicer to you, while you were there... He said that he felt like missing out on a lot, because you already disappeared again so soon! He said he felt really sorry for fighting with you. And Dustin? Every time I see him these days, he talks about bringing some snacks with him, in case you need to be "recharged". "

Max chuckled, and El's eyes looked a lot softer and very intently focused on her own gaze, now.

"Will is pretty quiet, most of the time, but the way he says your name... El, he basically thinks about you like some sort of guardian angel, you know? He's really thankful."

"*Guardian angle?*", Eleven repeated, frowning at the expression. Max snorted, thinking about Mr. Clarke and his monologues on the "beauty" of equiangular triangles.

"Angel", she corrected. "Do you know what that is?"

El shook her head.

"It's basically, like, a magical protector of someone. Like, a really awesome ghost with wings and stuff."

El's eyes widened. "Ghosts... are real?", she wondered, eyeing the room around her a little fearfully.

Max burst out in laughter. "I don't know.", she made clear, still laughing, and El's eyes shifted, losing a bit of their blatant trust and vulnerability. She seemed a little annoyed, like someone was making fun of her. Max quickly calmed down again, smiling now, and trying to look earnest for an instant.

"What I do know is, that these boys really, really like you, El. You're their friend, that's not going to suddenly stop just because I'm around!"

El's fingers started folding the paper in her hands again. She didn't seem convinced at all.

"Look, it's not even like they all had a problem with you last year, right? Lucas told me that Dustin was pretty open-minded! And Mike liked you right from the start, didn't he?"

Had she looked away, right then, Max wouldn't have noticed it,- it only lasted for half a second, or so. But El's fingers; her arms, her face,... she positively *flinched* for a small moment. Right when Max had said Mike's name. Almost like she didn't like it, that sound coming from Max' mouth...

Oh.

Max couldn't help it, she grinned.

"Oh wow. Seriously?", she snickered, under her breath.

It totally made sense now! Except it didn't, but it sort of did! Mike had been mad at Max for reasons that had nothing to do with her, and everything to do with El.

Of course it would be exactly the same here!

El was so obviously crazy about him and his pale little frog face, the mere idea of another girl around him would naturally freak her out!

"Eleven, are you jealous? Because of me and Mike?", Max asked, as cautiously as possible, and trying hard to keep the disbelieving smirk at bay.

She'd said it wrong, though.

That furious, sad look that came over El's features right then told Max just how spot on her assumption had been... Almost as much as the sound of crumpling paper. As she looked down, she saw that El had used her powers on Max' close-to-finished plane, completely destroying it in the process.

"Hey, what?!", Max almost shouted, enraged. "Was that really necessary?"

El looked halfway sorry, but didn't reply. Max sighed.

"Okay, so I get that you were scared about your friends forgetting you... Or going on with their lives without you... But all that bullshit is in the past now, anyway, you know? And that thing about Mike? I'm sorry to break it to you, but that's just insane! Why would you ever think...-"

She sighed again, stopping herself from getting too reproachful. El was pretty new to this world, after all.

"I want to be friends with him, okay El? Just like I want to be friends with you. I think... I think having some friends like that would be good for me. And it could be cool for you to be friends with me, too!"

Max dropped down to the floor, sitting across from El now. She was pleased to see that El didn't move away, instead still examining her with huge, brown eyes.

"I could show you how to skate... Or how to make my stepdad's famous brownies... It's the only really good thing about him, really, his brownies. I know that you like eggos, and candy and so on, so you'd probably like brownies, too. And maybe... I mean, eventually, if you ever feel like it... You could show me that car thing you can do. Lifting it up! It sounded so cool when Lucas told me about it!"

El's lips twitched a little, at that, and Max wasn't sure if she liked the compliment she'd heard, or the fact that Max was using Lucas' name so much, today... Max had noticed that, too.

"All I'm saying is, you shouldn't not like me, because I've literally not done anything wrong.", Max concluded, a little defensively.

To her surprise, El's gaze was suddenly really watery and her lips wobbled.

"El?"

With one quick movement, El had bend forwards, wrapping her arms tightly around the other girls neck, and drawn her into a warm hug. Her shoulders seemed a little shaky.

"I'm sorry, Max.", El confessed, quietly, and the end of that sentence sounded suspiciously like a sob. "I was stupid."

"Uh, no! It's alright, El, really!", Max spluttered, a little baffled by this outcome, but also really glad about the hug. She hadn't been hugged in a while, actually, come to think of it...

"I get it, believe me. But you really don't have to worry. I don't want to take anyone away from you."

El pulled back, still looking terribly ashamed, and mumbled Max' name.

"Yeah?"

"I pushed you. On your skateboard."

"What?"

"In the gym."

"I don't..-?"

"The gym. You and Mike were laughing..."

Max actually got what she meant.

It had been almost a month ago, now, but she still remembered that weird moment of slipping and falling and thinking about magnets...

"Oh my...- That was you? I knew that something was feeling weird!"

Actual tears were now making their way down towards El's chin. She truly looked heartbroken, and Max couldn't help but to shake her head, affectionately.

"Hey, hey!", she said, patting El's shoulder gently. "No offense taken, all right? You were just annoyed, it happens! You could have easily make my head explode, instead, so that's something!"

Max' upbeat tone made El giggle, in spite of the situation.

"Just... Don't do that again, alright you freak? Next time, we could use your powers for something more productive, if you don't mind. Like, cheat during a paper plane competition, to make the boys feel like real losers, or something."

El's smirk matched her own. "We?", she asked, tentatively, picking up on that word.

Max rolled her eyes, smiling in irony. "Well, duh. I'm not supposed to let you keep those superpowers of yours all to yourself now, am I? Not now that I agreed on sharing my skateboarding skills with you."

Their paper planes were pretty boring, but that was okay. It turned out that the boys had lost both Will's and Mike's paper planes somewhere in the dark bushes close to the house, and after agreeing that it had gotten too cold outside to keep looking for them right now, they all decided on holding a second competition tomorrow afternoon, maybe. Well, if they felt like it. *And* if Dustin wouldn't

happen to find a few leftover coins in his couch tonight, because if he did, they'd agreed on going to the amusement centre together and later meet El at the cabin for a film night. Paper plane competitions seemed to be more about the fun of building them, than of letting them fly, El assumed. Oh well, maybe she'd show Hopper how far she could throw her plane, sometime. The idea of making things fly without her powers sounded pretty interesting, still.

"I'll give you some of the vegetable loaf I made, El, so your Dad won't have to make dinner for himself later, okay?", Mrs Byers said, while they were all sitting spread around the Byers' living room and eating.

Will's Mum was the only one who constantly called Hopper *El's Dad* yet, which was feeling pretty odd. Maybe she did it unconsciously? But then again, El also liked it. And maybe Will's Mum could picture her good old friend so well as a Dad, because she'd already known him when *Sarah* was still there? Had Mrs Byers ever met Sarah? El didn't know. She just knew that she didn't want to correct Mrs. Byers about it.

Maybe, she should start calling Hopper *Dad* in a little while, anyway. He couldn't just be called "*Hopper*" forever, that wasn't even such a pretty name now, was it? *Dad* certainly had a nicer ring to it, El pondered.

She nodded, smiling when Mrs Byers sweetly fondled her hair as she passed by and sat down. Will's Mum was like all Mum's in the world should be, El thought.

"Weird that he's still not here.", Dustin said, frowning. "Didn't Hopper want to pick you up after work, El?"

El shrugged. "He sometimes works late.", she explained, glancing at Mike's wrist watch. It was two past eight, Hopper shouldn't be gone much longer.

"Well, it was nice seeing you today, Eleven.", Mrs Byers mentioned, while grabbing another piece of bread from the small table. "More salad, anyone?", she offered, smiling.

Mike had once mentioned to El that sitting on the floor during dinner

was something his own Mum would *never* allow, but the Byers had such a small dining table that they'd not all fit around that one.

El loved having dinners at the Byers' place in these big groups, though. It reminded her of a really big picnic, like the one's people sometimes had on television. Right now, it almost looked a bit like that moment three weeks ago, when she'd returned here. It had been so wonderful, seeing them all again for the first time in so long. The lightning was almost the same, the room was almost as crowded... Only this time, everyone was sitting and eating, instead of standing and pointing weapons at El.

The boys were talking about some sort of science homework that Max didn't seem particularly interested in, Will's mum kept coming up with questions, here and there, rather confused, and El leaned her head against the wall, contentedly.

She met Max' smile and returned it, across the room, while the conversation kept going. And when they finally heard a car approach the house, for only the length of a heartbeat, El felt Mike's lips touch her cheek, briefly and sweet, when he thought no one was looking.

El hoped the world would stay just like this for a long time.

The end.